

An Author Worth Defending. Introduction

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Issues connected with constructing and sanctioning various categories of embodiment have fascinated Ed Cohen since the beginnings of his academic career. He wrote his first book on the genealogy of discourses connected with masculinity⁷ in which he attempted to describe various processes of collective naturalising and assimilating the category of sex. His research interests have centred around the social and scientific foundations of human uniqueness. In the book *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Duke University Press, 2009), Cohen traces the genealogy of immunity back to the dual legal and biological origin of the concept of immunization. Immunity in the Roman law signified an exception from applying legal norms that are binding for all other citizens, and it still evokes the privilege of personal inviolability and exemption from legal proceedings. As Cohen indicates, the right to defend oneself, to declare the state of emergency, to suspend previous duties was incorporated into the medical discourse in the middle of the 19th century. Gradually, the paradigm of *vis vitalis*, an immaterial life power, was abandoned in favour of the need to defend the human body against external intruders and enemies. The successes of modern medicine implicitly confirmed this research model based on the separation of individuals from their environment. Immunology, as it is seen by Cohen, focuses on protecting the monadic, singular self. In other words, the purpose of his book is to examine how the essentialist assumptions of immunology are of direct concern to other life sciences that conceptualise the human body as one that is not only worth having, but also worth defending. While looking for the sources of monadic identity, Cohen attempts to recreate a biopolitics of immunity, inspired by the works of Foucault, starting with the legal notion of immunity as exception and the militaristic idea of immunity as defence.



⁷ *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (Routledge, 1993).

It is often said that attack is commonly regarded as the best form of defence, and this is presumably one of the reasons why making such an aggressive distinction between the self and the outside world of non-self should be counted among one of the most fiercely defended medical dogmas. Such a homeostatic truce between humans and the world became a useful category after the WWII when medicine triumphed over infectious diseases and the research on the workings of the immune system accelerated as a result of social, economic, cultural changes that may in part be attributed to the subsequent epidemic of AIDS. Another key word in Cohen's book is apotheosis, the idealization or deification of the human body separated in an artificial manner from other living organisms. The author elegantly combines medicine, biology, economy, politics, philosophy and above all history in order to describe the scientifically naturalised "innate defensiveness" of the human body against the external world, full of vicious viruses, bacteria and parasites. To Cohen, contemporary immunology is a consequence of regarding the need for defence against any internal enemies as an inalienable right and constitutes a basis for developing relations in the contemporary world. Cohen believes that the metaphor of the immunological system concerns not only the internal structure of living organisms, but above all the methods of shaping the social and political reality of the present. The assumption behind the innate defensiveness of organisms has resulted in a paradoxical situation where the efforts of health service do not target the population as a whole, but continue to separate individuals from the collective, since their illness is regarded as a consequence of a malfunctioning ontogenic immune system. The metaphorical struggle for subjectivity intensifies at the border of the skin and reduces the experience of an ill individual to a biochemical problem, while failing to see the social and material context of a given disease entity.

Cohen, using compelling historical arguments, points to the key role of metaphorised "immunity" in life sciences and shows how accepting the metaphorical dogma of defensiveness as rational and normative has influenced the theoretical concepts and experimental research in immunology. The author is presently working on an autobiography depicting his life-long struggle with Crohn's disease and a book on healing and the vitality of life. It may be of interest to add that Roberto Esposito⁸ has made an attempt to philosophically reconfigure the notions of immunisation and communitisation by putting forward a project of affirmative biopolitics based on the idea of communal, non-singular immunity.

Ed Cohen's website: <http://tinyurl.com/edcohen>

Picture source: Ed Cohen's archives.

⁸ Esposito, Roberto. *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Trans. Timothy Campbell. Posthumanities, vol. 4. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.